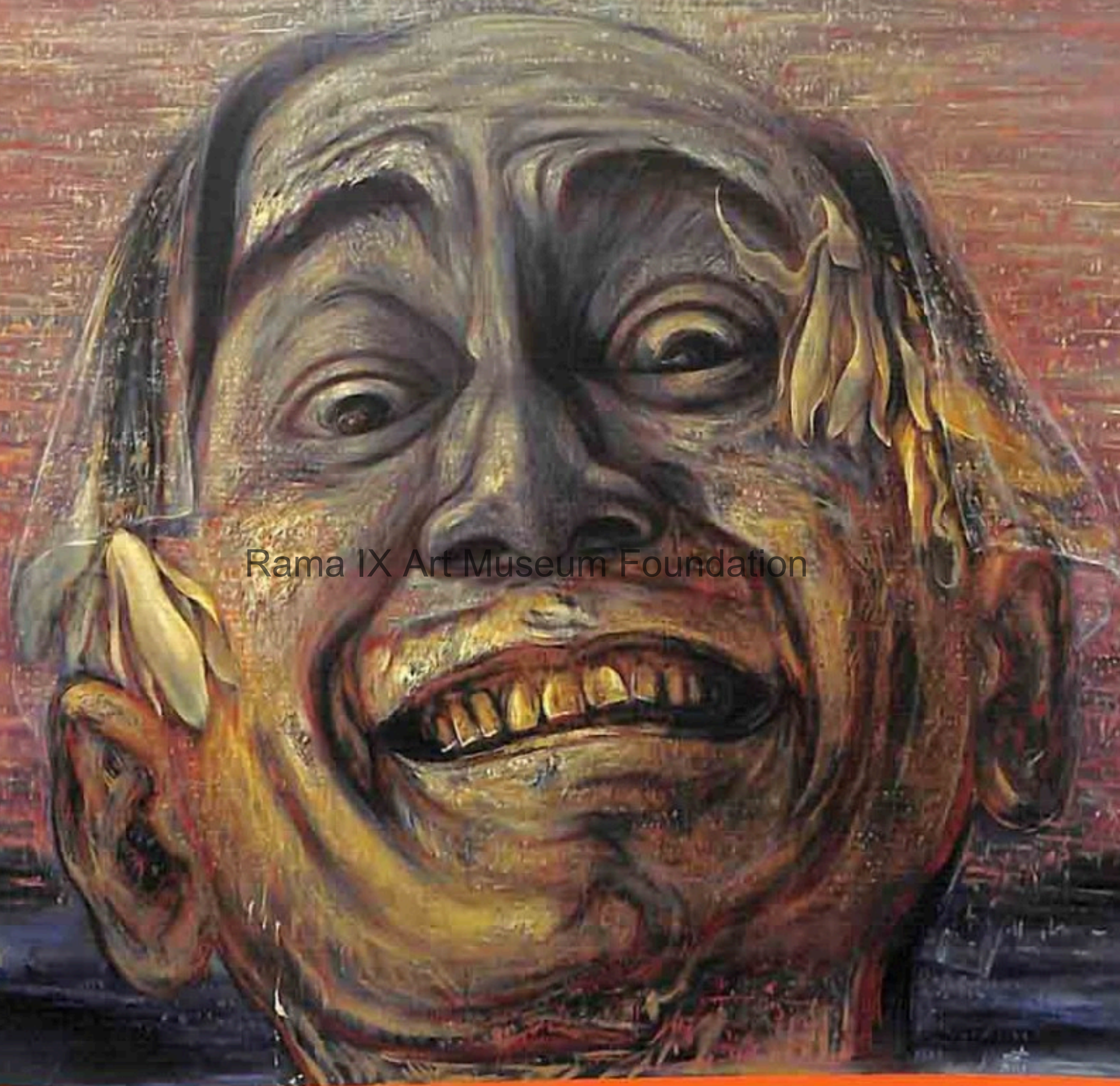


Behind Thai Smiles



Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

Apinan Poshyananda

Selected Writings, 1991-2007

Foreword by Benedict Anderson

Introduction by John Clark

Behind Thai Smiles

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As government institution the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (OCAC), Ministry of Culture is responsible in promoting and disseminating contemporary Thai art. For better understanding of contemporary Thai art in knowledge-based society, it is essential that dissemination is made through publications, journals, catalogues, websites, and exhibitions.

Contemporary Thai art has been receiving international attention and critical acclaim. The presence of Thai artists at biennales, triennales, art fairs, and various prestigious art exhibitions have placed Thailand on the international art scene. Although there are catalogues, books, and interviews published on Thai artists there are few publications that cover the rationale, explanation, and incentive on the international breakthrough by these artists.

A series of publication by the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture including *Venice Biennale*, *Tout à Fait Thai*, *Show Me Thai*, *Death Before Dying: The Return of Montien Boonma*, and *S.I.A.M. Contemp.* journals have been distributed at art schools, universities, art institutions, and museums at home and abroad. The endeavour to encourage study and knowledge on contemporary Thai art is an attempt to create awareness of importance in this artistic field.

Behind Thai Smiles consists of selected writings during 1991-2007 by Prof. Dr Apinan Poshyananda whose lectures and articles on the history of modern and contemporary Thai art have been widely accepted. All the articles have been previously published by international art journals, museums, and art institutions including *Art AsiaPacific*, The Asia Society, New York, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, and Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Prof. Dr Poshyananda's expertise and experience as art historian, critic, and curator have played a significant role in supporting and disseminating contemporary Thai art on international arenas. His curatorial work and writing on international artists have contributed the recognition of contemporary Thai art on international art world.

For *Behind Thai Smiles*, Dr Poshyananda has kindly given permission for the publication of his selected writing on contemporary Thai art. The purpose of this book is for art students, artists, curators, and readers who wish to learn and understand about contemporary Thai art and its history, network, infrastructure, and position on international stage.

We take this opportunity to warmly thank Prof. Dr Benedict Anderson, Cornell University, New York and Prof. Dr John Clark, University of Sydney for writing Foreword and Introduction, respectively, for *Behind Thai Smiles*.

This book is aimed for an appreciation of contemporary Thai art as well as Thai artists and the milieu they live in. The purpose of this publication is for education and dissemination of contemporary Thai art. *Behind Thai Smiles* is published by the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture, free of charge.

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Foreword

Benedict Anderson¹

In the compartmentalized world of American universities it is quite rare for a professor of Political Science to have much contact with students specializing in Art History. Hence, to this day, I feel very fortunate that Khun Apinan Poshyananda asked me to help supervise his outstanding (and bulky) doctoral dissertation, completed in 1991. It was a panoramic, theoretically sophisticated, and beautifully researched study (laced with wicked wit) of the complex, contradictory processes whereby Thai artists came to grapple with modernity and modernism — resisting, embracing, and mastering them (If one were an adman, one could summarize the theme as 'From anonymous temple muralists to Rirkrit Tiravanija.'). It was something quite new, and, as occasionally happens, the student who wrote it ended up by teaching his teachers.

So it is again with this collection of some of his major essays, composed over the seventeen tumultuous years between 1991 and 2007. Apinan has had the courage and grace not to tamper with the originals in the interest of appearing clairvoyant and error-free. This modesty allows us to follow both the turmoil of Thai politics between the short lived, abortive military regimes of 1991-2 ('bang') and 2006-7 ('whimper'), as well as Apinan's own intellectual trajectory and artistic sympathies.

If I am not mistaken, the early essays show Apinan in the classical position of the *nakrian nauk* (first in the UK, later in the US) returning home. In the booming middle 1990s, one can see him excited, but not blinded, by his country's advance to the status of NIC and Asian Tiger. We can see how aware he is of the negative effects of 'globalization' on substantial segments of Thai society, but this awareness does not at all cancel his optimism about the future. Like many a spirited foreign-educated youngster (not just in Siam but all over

¹ Professor Dr. Benedict Anderson taught at Cornell University from 1967-2002; he was Director of the Cornell Southeast Asia program from 1983-88. His final position was Aaron L. Binenkorb Professor of International Studies. He is author of numerous books including *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) and *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (1994). Professor Anderson was the Fukunaka Prize for contributions to the study of Southeast Asia and the Association for Asian Studies Award for lifetime contributions to Asian studies.

Asia at different periods), who has had to defend his identity in the white West, he had become a nationalist. This helps us to understand his initial attachment to the substantial group of artists who to different degrees represented what Apinan terms neo-traditionalism, rejecting the 'international style' as alien and destructive, and embracing Buddhism and Buddhist iconography. These early essays visibly champion Chalermpipat Kositpipat and Thawan Duchanee as imaginative, nationalist transformers of Buddhist-oriented art.

The financial crash of 1997 was, as we know, a devastating shock to Thai society at all levels, from which even today it has not fully recovered. The later essays in this volume show well how it affected Apinan's thinking. The kindhearted optimism is still there, but it is no longer jubilant. He now becomes very critical of the 'bubble economy' of the early 1990s, the superficiality of Bangkok's would-be *sakon* consumerism, the crass commercialization of the art world, and deepening social problems — drug addiction, poverty, rural exploitation, gender discrimination, corruption within the Sangha, the massive spread of organized prostitution, and so on. If earlier on he had accepted the official nationalist ideology of Chat, Sasana, Kasat, this acceptance now gives way to a much more critical stance, so that it is possible for him to talk about 'official propaganda,' and a fossilized, defensive, falsely homogenized, bureaucratically-propelled, 'state culture.' The neo-traditionalist artists are now viewed as reactionaries who, so to speak, have climbed into bed with big bankers, hotel tycoons, and Bangkok's sentimentalist (also stressed out) nouveaux riches.

My sense is that after 1997 Apinan more and more understood that the popular opposition between 'tradition' or 'Thai identity' and 'westernization' was a false one. The outcome of this change can be seen in at least three ways. First of all, there is a much enlarged appreciation of women artists. Before 1997, he wrote that these artists too readily accommodated themselves to male domination in general and male artists in particular, confining their work to traditionalist norms. Later on, however, he writes passionately about the power structure of the 'art world,' and salutes the rise of 'deep' women artists like Pinaree Sanpitak and Araya Rasdjarmreansook, who without being 'militant feminists,' have forced people to think in new, much less 'phallogocentric' ways about what it means to be Thai. Second, Apinan now champions a new generation of artists such as Mani Siwanichpoom and Vasana Sithiket, who are politically engaged, masters of satire and irony, with brilliant painterly imaginations. These people are completely oriented towards Siam and Thai society. If one thinks of the famous Mani image of the blank-faced, portly Pink Man wheeling his supermarket trolley past the hanging corpse of a Thammasat student victim of the barbarity of October 6, 1976, one sees immediately that almost no one but Thais would understand the image or feel its sickening power.

Third, Apinan shows us how it is possible, and necessary, to transcend the old-fashioned defensive idea of Fortress Meuang Thai under global siege. For most people who do not know much about Thai art, the exemplary figure is film-maker of genius Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Apichatpong's major films – *Mysterious Object at Noon*, *Sut Saneha*, *Sat Pralaat*, and *Saeng Sattawat* – have won countless international avant-garde prizes, but they are utterly Thai without any bowing-and-scraping to Official Tradition. His 'origins,' if that is the right word, are the traditional Thai cinema which 'sakon' Bangkokians have always despised, and the best avant-garde film study centre in the US. Needless to say, officialdom hates, fears, obstructs and slanders the great man (as Apinan pointedly notes) precisely because he is 'more Thai' than they are, but also because he has no time for 'Thailand' as a commercial-political project. In the art world, the comparable figure is Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose meteoric rise to global fame began with the installation-art of cooking *phad thai*. Not how Thai-thai it is, but how good it tastes and smells, especially within an 'installation.' In a political culture which for decades has insisted that everything valuably Thai comes from the top of the social pyramid, it has taken courage for these two men, and many others like them, to undermine this hierarchy by starting out 'from below,' from the grass roots of their country.

What Apinan ends up telling his readers can be illustrated by a recent conversation I had with the revered Father of Thai cinema Than Mui. The great man said, more or less, this – and he was quite right – "no one outside Thailand gives a s--t about *Suriyothai* and *Naresuan*. So I am making films, these days, about and for *khon Thai*." Actually, his fine films of the 1980s, *Meu Peun* and *Salavin* among others, show beautifully that there is no wall between films that khon Thai and foreigners admire.

It remains only to say a few words about the way that Apinan writes. Art criticism can often be opaque to the intelligent general reader if it is overloaded with professional jargon and technical terminology. But the essays in this book are very accessible. The prose is fluent; the occasional jokes are amusing, and the insights acute. There is no showing off, no axes are ground and no mean-spirited gossip is circulated. The reader comes away with a strong impression of the writer's character. He is a kind man, with rewardingly catholic sympathies. All the many art works that he mentions or discusses are treated with respect, and one feels immediately that if Apinan has a low opinion of an art work or even of an artist, he chooses to be silent. This stance is that of an optimist and a gentleman. An excellent combination for surmounting our ruthless present.

Introduction

By John Clark¹

It may be difficult now to recall the situation around seventeen years ago when almost no attention was paid in Europe and North America to Modern and Contemporary Art from Asian countries, let alone to its art historical understanding. What now appears to be the quasi-normative inclusion of writing on Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Malaysian, Singaporean, Thai and other modern Asian art writings in collections of essays and catalogues, or the regular appearance of Asian artists in Biennales, was not the case then. One might also somewhat facetiously see the rise of this understanding or exhibition of art works as a natural phenomenon of a post-modern and increasingly transnational art world. Its art markets' hunger for the new, principally in the last decade for art from China followed by India, set the agenda for recognition and inclusion. Such a view would set aside the very real efforts of local artists and curators (sometimes wearing both hats) to see their works and their understandings were included in a broader conception of modern art². They tried to position what were in some cases relatively small countries with a limited number of international artists inside those pre-established circuits of recognition. Changing those agenda-setting mechanisms away from Euramerican ones towards regional Asian or more broadly inclusive transnational ones – whether by haphazard local art market developments in contemporary art, curatorial strategies or intellectual exchange – would have to be left to the later cumulative effects of their efforts, even as we begin to see them appear after around 2000.

Few writers, curators, and administrators have both been aware enough of these dynamics and able to make their own intellectual and curatorial interventions as Apinan Poshyananda. Whilst one might disagree occasionally about some of his views or selections,

¹ John Clark, FAHA, CIHA, PhD, is Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow at the University of Sydney and founding director of the Australian Centre for Asian Art & Archaeology.

² I am thinking, among many others, of earlier efforts by Lang Shaojun, Sui Tianzhong, and Shao Dazhen in China, Aoki Shigeru, Kazu Kaid and Sakai Tadayasu in Japan, Kim Youngna in Korea, the late Rodza Pyadana in Malaysia, Aure Guillermo in the Philippines, T.K. Sabapathy in Singapore, Somporn Rodboon in Thailand, and Yen Chuan-yang in Taiwan. In these efforts they were joined by several foreign scholars including Julia Andrews and Ellen J. Laing on China, Doris Lederose-Croissant and Ellen Conant on Japan, Helene Sparyard and Aster Wright on Indonesia.

nevertheless if we want to understand modern art in Southeast Asia and Thailand in particular, Apinan's contribution to understanding is as basic as it has also been to the wider circulation of Thai and other Southeast Asian art works. He has at the same time been a major facilitator of inward flows on international art to Thailand, in a country only in 2008 to be blessed by a proper Museum of Contemporary Art. But his work on other than Thai art will be in a separate volume and I will not take it up here.

The essays in this collection are drawn from 1991-1995 and 2000-2007. The first series takes Thai art into the international arena by questioning the degree of relativization of local styles by overseas contacts. It also analyses the local strategies of changing imported Western styles by Thai artists and conditions which begin to historically appear less and less dependent on what was borrowed. If there is an underlying current running through Apinan's writing it is of cross-national exchange as a kind of mutual bewitchment, where both sides are self-enthralled by looking as much in their own mirror as in the other's obliging reflection. This concern with masks comes out particularly in the second essay originally given at Canberra in 1991. Here he turned on its head the 'other-enabling' trajectory in Western theorization of post-modernism by pointing out that the 'modern' it was 'post' to, was neither the same everywhere, nor had similar chronologies. The viewpoint could have been developed by a Lacanian analysis, and theory without immediate application is not one of Apinan's strong concerns, but the point that cultural transference under 'post-modern' conditions involved a mutual and possibly infinite regress to previous exoticisms was well made.

This view came out again much later in quite interesting tactical position at the first Thai pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2003. Apinan as commissioner then tried to get round international ignorance of the Thai contemporary by putting on a kind of 'exotic' display with the flavour of a Thai street market. It had the effect of demonstrating the cultural structure of Western artistic ignorance, but it would appear the absence of serious response from international curators resulted in some learning for future representations. The Thai exhibitions in at Venice in 2005 and 2007 were far more modest and artistically successful.

Apinan has been well aware of the limitations of the Thai art world and certainly unafraid to discuss these in lively interventions in Thai English newspapers such as *The Nation* and *Bangkok Post* as much as in international art magazines. I do not know how fully his views were re-distributed in the Thai-language press, most of which in my impression apart from *Mattichon* and *Phufulkarn* (Manager) would be sensationalist enough to make a British tabloid editor blush. Apinan has often contested a kind of publicly anti-intellectual and widely accepted public vulgarity in taste for art. According to various German-Thai specialists and dictionaries

I have consulted Thai has no proper or standard translation of the German *kitsch*, so the concept of false art, or bad art lying as true art is without much currency.

But in choice of artists for the Biennale of Sydney in 1992 and the accompanying Art and Asia Pacific essay of 1993 here Poshyananda showed rare a public willingness to criticize the 'condo art' and 'lobby art' flooding the art market in ways which should have made some Thai artists wince. In the same year he also showed a willingness to take on Thai male chauvinism in *Confess and Conceal* giving prominence to the work of Pinaree Sanpitak and other women artists which showed there was another, non male-centered way of positioning the [Thai] female body, and he often returns to this theme in other essays. In a country where the implicit line of expensive government-funded tourism advertisements was that sexual adventures were easy and cheap this was implicitly controversial.

He was living much more dangerously when he linked Thai Nationalism to [male] sexual attitudes in the *Traditions/Tensions* catalogue published by The Asia Society in 1996. This essay fairly unambiguously raised the issue that the representations of Country, Religion, and Monarchy created a symbolic space which pushed out or broadly constricted many other kinds of artistic representation. Or, at the minimum they motivated a space of taboo which could be manipulated by politicians claimed to stand for nation. Setting aside 'modest neo-traditionalism' which could be the representation of customary beliefs and their frail realization in a modern world, he here implicitly linked the grandiose neo-traditional mural in banks and hotels to the metaphor of Thai national culture as a theme park, where 'viewers are entertained by visual extravaganzas with little concern for its seeming contradictions'. In this fantasy world, images of be-medaled officers could stand as fetishes for ceremonial dignity in photographers' shops, and consumption goods could paradigmatically display national metonyms where the beer you drank identified you as 'Thai'. These phenomena were edgily analysed elsewhere by major cultural thinkers like Theerayut Boonmee and Kasian Tejapira. Maybe Apinan had their ideas in mind, or the ideas were common in unwritten Thai intellectual discourse but brought out by him for art.

Apinan has always been creditably loyal to the same artists of reference in his earlier set of texts such as Vasan Sithikhet, Pinaree Sanpitak, Chatchai Puipia, Kamol Phaowasadi, Kamin Lertchipsant, and Mani Sriwanichpoom. In the second period covered by these essays of the 2000s he began to mention newer cohorts including Sutee Kunavichayanont, Busadee Laomanchareon, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Navin Rawanchaikul, and Pornaweesak Rimsakul. These artists had mostly achieved prominent recognition overseas and he had known Rirkrit Tiravanija in New York since 1988. The former set of artists, who by the end of the 1990s were now

over-canonized, escaped more severe art criticism from him even though in several cases their work had obviously become self-referential or tediously repetitive. Apinan's forte has been in piecing together the slippery interface between artistic representation and the perils of social self-images mediated by institutional and symbolic structures. These phenomena all have links to the self-mirroring of social elites, some artists' international exposure owing much to their high social connections as much as to the qualities of their own art works.

What has become clear by the essays leading up to the Guggenheim lecture in 2007 is a much more open shift in Apinan's writing to concern with the internal constraints on Thai art 'Behind the smile', rather than its external reception. It may not always be easy to tell from Apinan's written texts what had been the impact of their verbal presentation. Apinan has never been afraid to mix different types of reference or writing style but sometimes his slipping in of high theory in texts masks the greater daring or even effrontery of his own exposure when he delivered them orally. I remember a gasp of astonishment arose from the audience at the Non-Aligned art exhibition in Jakarta, 1995, at his lecture in the following conference. This came after his inclusion of a slide that he had taken from a position at the front available only to a VIP a few hours earlier. The photograph was of the President of Indonesia, Suharto, when he came to the exhibition opening. It was almost as if he showed authority of this most powerful and still feared figure in the nation could be bracketed by the rather socially critical works shown in following slides. Charm amidst danger and doubleness are qualities required for the effective insertion of an aporia at the heart of discourses which would otherwise go unquestioned in the absence of a more radical overthrow, or gradual but terminal decay. Apinan in his own way has pushed this envelope rather vigorously for Thai art.

Author's Note

When the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (OCAC), Ministry of Culture began a series of publication on contemporary Thai art in 2003 its aim was to distribute and showcase exciting works by Thai artists. The lack of writing and criticism on contemporary Thai art has been chronic and relentless that something had to be done to improve the situation. Since then many books, catalogues, and journals have been published and circulated by OCAC but by no means enough to improve the serious condition of Thai art publication.

When I was asked to select some of my previously published articles for the book *Behind Thai Smiles* I felt honored to be able to contribute to the Thai art scene. Since these articles were written for international symposiums and art journals over a period of 17 years they cover the time when I was involved in curating international art exhibitions. Although, I have been asked permission to reprint some of the articles it is the first time that they are compiled together for institutional purposes. The collection of these articles will give opportunity for students and readers to learn more on contemporary Thai art.

These writings are arranged in approximate chronology starting in 1991 when I completed my Ph.D dissertation from Cornell University and my first book *Modern Art in Thailand* was published in 1992 by Oxford University Press. Some of these articles attempt to define Thai art in context of modernism and post-modernism. Examples of neo-traditional revivalism are discussed in paintings by Thawan Duchanee, Chalermchai Kositpipat, and Panya Vijithanathan. Other writings reflect the mood of social and political turmoil such as the events leading up to the Black May Massacre in 1992 and the coup d'état in 2006. These events are seen through works by Vasan Sithiket and Manit Sriwanichpoom. Certain issues including the marginalization of female artists are focused on works by Pinaree Sanpitak and Araya Rasdjarmreansook while inspiration of Buddhism through meditation and art practice is discussed in works by Montien Boonma and Kamin Lertchaiprasert. New internationalism and positioning of Thai artists as desire for locality and ethnicity are conferred in works by Rirkrit Tiravanija and Navin Rawanchaikul. The article ends in 2007 with reflection on contemporary Thai art during post-Thaksin Shinawatra era and censorship under the military government. Due to limited space I had to omit the lengthy article 'The Path of *Dubla* (Suffering)' published in the book *Temple of the Mind: Montien Boonma* for the exhibition

"The Path of *Dukka* (Suffering)" published in the book *Temple of the Mind: Montien Boonma* for the exhibition that travelled to The Asia Society, New York, The Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, and The National Art Gallery, Canberra.

I have included a short article on the transformation of contemporary Thai art from 1991 to the present. It is a summary that gives an overall view of development of contemporary Thai art and a glimpse of what to come in the future.

I would like to thank the artists and collectors for permitting their art works to be published. Many thanks to Prof. Dr Benedict Anderson (Khru Ben to many of his students including myself) for kindly writing Foreword and Prof. Dr John Clark for his astute and insightful contribution for Introduction. Thanks to the staff of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture for their endurance and patience.

Apinan Poshyananda

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Asian Definitions of Modernity in Art: Relativization of Styles in Thai Art

The West may mystify the East by reducing its variegated peoples and cultures to stereotypes of barbarity and underdevelopment. At the same time, the East has stood as a site of the exotic or primitive for art and culture. Thailand boasts a myriad of pleasures for the visiting tourists. The very name evokes images of sweet, painted ladies in silk, gilded Buddhist temples, lotus ponds, and paddy fields. The Tourism Authority of Thailand and the Office of the National Culture Commission have gone to great pains to promote Thailand as the Land of Smiles and *sanuk* (fun).

These institutions define culture as goodness and beauty, something useful for social life, and something which creates order, happiness, prosperity, unity, and solidarity in the community established by the ancestors. As heirs to this culture, Thais have learned to appreciate this intellectual heritage and hold on to it. However, both preconceived notions quickly disappear after a few hours in the highly polluted Bangkok, the City of Angels. Bangkok has become the place that breeds discontentment and anxiety. The Land of Smiles and *sanuk* has turned into the land of disillusion and frustration.

It is difficult to judge which is worse, the Burmese army's sacking of Ayudhya, the old capital of Siam, or the Western-style modernization of Bangkok, the country's present capital city. Bangkok has often been described by both Thais and foreigners as ugly. This metropolis has changed greatly and rapidly because it is Thailand's political and administrative center as well as the hub of business and commerce, industry, transport, and entertainment.

The Thai economy has undergone dramatic structural change over the past three decades. Once an inward-looking, import-substitution economy relying on exports of agricultural products and raw materials, Thailand is experiencing one of the fastest economic growth rates in the world as a result of its export-orientation and its greatly diversified production base. Thailand has subsequently acquired a name under the label of NIC, Newly Industrializing Country.

As the world marvels at Thailand's dramatic growth in technology and production, its political and intellectual institutions display many signs of stress and strain. How is modernity (*saphawa samaimai*) viewed in Thai art? It must be understood that within this period – as in many others, both in the East and the West – innovation sometimes develops out of what has gone before; equally it sometimes